

Reflections on symbolic ethnicity

A response to Y. Anagnostou

HERBERT J. GANS

Columbia University, USA

I am flattered by Professor Anagnostou's close reading of my 1979 article on symbolic ethnicity and his intensive re-examination of the concept over a quarter century later. I also appreciate his using it to deal with current issues he considers important. However, I trust he does not criticize me for my inability to anticipate these issues 28 years ago, or my article for not having undertaken current ideological work that he deems significant on the basis of his own ideology.

Because his critique moves back and forth between symbolic ethnicity and ethnic options, I should begin with my comparison of the two concepts. Both symbolic ethnicity and Mary Waters' path-breaking concept are late 20th-century responses to the assimilation and acculturation processes of the descendants of the European immigrants. In addition, the two concepts are connected logically and empirically, for both concepts suggest a new stage in these processes.

Symbolic ethnicity proposes that ethnicity can survive without significant social or cultural participation; the notion of ethnic options argues that the later descendants of immigrants have some choice in the ethnicity with which they identify.

Still, the two concepts differ in some respects. Symbolic ethnicity is a new stage that is available to all who are embedded in the assimilation and acculturation processes. Ethnic options are, as just noted, mainly relevant for understanding the descendants of ethnic intermarriages, those growing up in or becoming part of a bicultural or polycultural family or network, and increasingly, the later generations of the European immigration to the US who have no connection with their immigrant ancestors' homelands.

Moreover, symbolic ethnicity proposes the rejection of or a departure from active ethnicity: from participation in ethnic groups and in ethnic culture. It hypothesizes a passive ethnicity, involving the temporary and periodic expression of feelings about or toward the ethnic group or culture through material and non-material symbols. Symbolic ethnicity can even be a leisure time activity that does not interfere with the economic, social and other imperatives of everyday life. Actually, it probably has to take place during people's leisure time unless they work in their ethnic community.

Ethnic options, however, allow for a choice between active and passive ethnicity. The people who can resort to ethnic options are free to involve themselves actively or passively in the chosen ethnic group and culture;

indeed, people who adopt a spousal ethnicity through intermarriage occasionally take to it with the same intensity as converts to a new religion or ideology.

Still, Anagnostou overestimates the amount of choice involved in both concepts. Although an Italian American is as free as anyone else to enjoy Greek cooking or music, he cannot therefore feel Greek or describe himself as of Greek ancestry when the US Census questionnaire arrives in the mail. Likewise, the child of an Italian–Irish intermarriage cannot choose Greekness as her ethnic option.

Consequently, neither concept views ethnicity literally as a voluntary status or role, even though Anagnostou begins his critique with that observation. My work on symbolic ethnicity says nothing about ethnicity becoming voluntary, and ethnic options offer only limited choice. True, under some conditions, ethnicity has been voluntary long before Waters and I published the works being discussed here, for immigrants to America have always been able to shed their ethnicity as long as their skin was white and their English good and accent-free enough so that they could avoid being identified as ethnics. In effect, they could ‘pass’ as non-ethnic and undoubtedly there are those who did. Indeed, before the Second World War, when anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism flourished on many campuses, Jewish and ethnic Catholic professors had to learn to be WASPish enough to be hired.

Furthermore, whatever choice is available to American ethnics has little to do with American individualism. Perhaps Americans are freer to make some cultural choices than people in other societies – although by this criterion, the US and Western Europe seem to be converging quickly. However, the choices people can make have to be shared, socially and culturally. People who make purely individual choices not shared by others are thereby prevented from forming social ties and even communicating with others, and must eventually wind up talking to themselves in mental hospitals. Had de Tocqueville been a better sociologist, he might have called his neologism socio-individualism.

ETHNIC IDENTITY

Both symbolic ethnicity and ethnic options originated in the era when the study of ethnicity dealt mainly with assimilation and acculturation. Although I indicated that symbolic ethnicity enables people to ‘feel’ ethnic, I could not and did not address contemporary issues around the concept of identity, for they had not yet come up.

Today, researchers concentrate, to my mind excessively, on the study of ethnic identity, an empirically difficult-to-study concept that ranges from

internal or self-identification to external identification, i.e. by others (Nagel, 1994). Identities can be experienced at varying levels of intensity, including the superficial and frequently situational reactions that accompany labeling, especially when people must choose between ethnic, racial and ancestral labels from precoded alternatives on a Census questionnaire or a job application. I suspect that for most people in the third and later generations, ethnic identity is a superficial feeling, far from the 'personally enriching' experience discussed by Anagnostou, and for most ethnics, like symbolic ethnicity, a fairly cost-free accompaniment of the assimilation process (Gans, 2007).

Because identity has now turned into the conceptual hegemon of ethnic research, it is worth asking why. Perhaps assimilation and acculturation are no longer productive concepts, and besides, studying them requires field-work or intensive interviewing. Identities can be studied through surveys, inferred from census and other large databases, and even analyzed from the scholarly armchair. In addition, identity became an accessible substitute for researchers when they and others were denying the reality of assimilation and acculturation. However, the researchers focusing on identity may have responded as well to the people they study, some of whom may be more interested in exploring and expressing their identity than in participating in more active forms of ethnicity.

Even so, I sometimes think that ethnic researchers are more interested in identity than the people they study, in part because it is so much a college (university) phenomenon. College students *sui generis* are of an age in which identity and identity exploration are important. College students from ethnic or racial minorities tend to concern themselves with their identities if they are studying on a campus that practices diversity but is also dominated by a native-born Anglo faculty and student body. In fact, the students' identity work has less to do with ethnicity itself than with struggling for equality of treatment. However, I suspect that most students give up or downgrade their concern with their ethnic identity once they graduate into the non-academic world. Admittedly, identity remains an important social, political and emotional resource for victims of discrimination but in America virtually all discrimination these days is directed against racial minorities, not ethnic ones.

ETHNICITY AND 'ETHNIC NATIONALISM'

If I understand Anagnostou's main critique of symbolic ethnicity, he finds it wanting because it does not accord with his notion of ethnic nationalism. Anagnostou does not define this term, but I take it to be a very active but also a very consequential ethnicity, which involves struggles over land and

boundaries, scarce and valuable resources, and political power and authority. Ethnic nationalism can produce new nations, but it can also bring about civil wars, ethnic cleansing and even genocides.

As a country, the US, like other countries with latent or manifest aspirations toward empire, may practice ethnic nationalism, and some immigrants have supported efforts to free their birthplaces from colonial or other forms of domination. However, inside America, ethnicity is becoming a harmless status and role that does not involve bloody conflict and rarely even involves nationalistic feelings.

Even in the past, the US has rarely experienced such deadly nationalism. True, riots and street battles took place in past centuries – and sometimes still do, although almost never over ethnic issues. Now, adolescents sometimes use ethnicity to fight for control of turf. Instead, white America has pursued racial nationalism, beginning with the genocidal wars on native Americans and the centuries of slave oppression. Of course, today's distinctions between race and ethnicity – a term which in American sociology dates back only to the 1930s – did not exist at the time. Still, the intense and often murderous conflicts associated with ethnic nationalism elsewhere in the world have not occurred in the US. The violence, mainly between whites and blacks, whites and Chinese, and in the West and Southwest, whites and Latinos, has been of a smaller scale and has not produced either wars or civil wars.

Needless to say, examples of ethnic conflict can still be found. In communities that have become home to large numbers of immigrants, ethnic groups remain political interest groups (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963) or form voting blocs that must be catered to at election time. Some ethnic groups continue to control occupational niches and restrict the entry of workers from other ethnic groups. Ethnic neighborhood battles still erupt occasionally when large numbers of ethnic newcomers move into areas dominated by native-borns or members of another ethnic group, and the prior occupants either do not want to leave or cannot afford to.

Today, however, these battles are mainly racial as well, although even white–non-white racial violence has been scarce since the end of the 1960s. Violence between non-white racial groups is now found mainly between competitors in the drug trade, and in the prisons to which many are then sent.

I realize that students of whiteness argue that in the past and now, dominant whites racialized white ethnic minorities, but even if the European immigrants were swarthy in skin color, they were still white and thus clearly distinguishable from the so-called black and yellow races. Moreover, America's WASP majority was more disturbed by the poverty and religious affiliations of the European immigrants than by their skin color or even their ethnicity. WASPs were eating in Chinese restaurants even while they still refused to admit Chinese immigrants, and they were drinking Irish whiskey concurrently with harassing Irish Catholics.

Today all this has changed. High intermarriage rates between whites, Asians and Latinos suggest that many of the latest non-white newcomers who are not black and poor are quickly being whitened, although even black skin seems not be as threatening to whites when it is African and foreign rather than African American. Ethnic differences among inter-married spouses appear to be so unimportant that researchers are ignoring them.

ANCESTRY

Anagnostou misinterprets American ethnicity even more dramatically when he connects ethnicity to ancestry and turns ethnicity into a biological phenomenon, which harks back to past, more eugenicist times. Indeed, he approvingly quotes an anthropologist who believes ethnicity is 'something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided', and who views it as a 'potent unconscious process' to be unearthed not by research but by autobiography.

Equally important, Anagnostou views ancestry to be an inherently national phenomenon. To be sure, this is a common view, and the US Census and other agencies, in America as elsewhere, define ancestry as a national concept. But ancestors can be defined in other ways, and in everyday life, ancestry is a status we assign retroactively to people who engaged in the sexual intercourse that led eventually to our birth. Consequently, ancestry is a familial rather than a national concept, and discourse with and about ancestors addresses them with kinship rather than political terminology.

Most important, perhaps, ancestry is, formally speaking, not even politically relevant in the US, for all children born in the US are American citizens even if their parents have just arrived as immigrants. In addition, many American immigrants, other than those who arrived after 1965, were not aware that they lived in a nation, for they knew only the villages from which they came. Others, particularly those from Eastern Europe, reached these shores before the modern nation-state was invented in their part of the world.

Others who did know, later discovered that during and after both world wars, the nations in which their places of birth were located suddenly had a different name or became part of another country. For example, many Jewish and Slavic immigrants born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire learned that after the First World War they had become Poles, Hungarians, Czechoslovakians and Yugoslavians. As for their descendants, many neither knew nor cared where their parents or grandparents were born, one reason they are often called hyphenated Americans.

Today, modern transportation technology facilitates retaining some ties with the country of origin, but unlike refugees, immigrants who come to the US for economic reasons retain ties mainly with their families and familial ancestors. However, even active transnationals rarely return to their home country permanently, and the members of the second generation who return do so mainly for vacations (Waldinger, forthcoming). By the third generation, transnationalism may be limited to those whose ancestors own homes by the sea or on a mountain top.

Moreover, for the second and later generations, ancestry is even more fluid a self-designation than identity. Whenever the US Census changes the order of the examples it attaches to the ancestry questions, the country newly listed first suddenly acquires millions of new descendants (Perlmann and Waters, 2007).

When Anagnostou asserts that 'the classical nation-state equates national belonging with ethnic descent (one is German because of Germanic blood)', he turns ancestry and ethnicity into a primordial concept that retains eugenicist origins. He seems to do the same when he writes that 'symbolic ethnicity reproduces an essential link between behavior (culture) and cultural membership (identity) and by understanding identity on the basis of ancestry (Waters) . . . [conflates] . . . culture with identity and biology'. I see no links or connotations when third-generation ethnics express their identity by going to an ethnic restaurant or renting an ethnic movie.

Likewise, I fail to understand why he thinks that 'symbolic ethnicity reproduces the descent-based model of national identity prevalent in the ideology of the classical nation-state'. The symbols typically used to pursue symbolic ethnicity are leftovers from agrarian diets and festivals, and it is hard to imagine that 19th-century folk dances in 19th century rural costumes represent any ideology of any state.

ORIGINS OF SYMBOLIC ETHNICITY

Finally, a comment on the origin of symbolic ethnicity. Despite the fact that much of my empirical work has involved participant-observation, now often called ethnography, Anagnostou is wrong to suggest that symbolic ethnicity is an artifact of the ethnographic method. He is equally wrong to argue that it produces 'a notorious circularity . . . strongly played out in the ethnographic field, when researchers of symbolic ethnicity set out to interview white ethnics'.

In 1949, I spent part of a year studying the origin of a Jewish subcommunity in Park Forest, a newly built suburb near Chicago. Some years later, while writing a more general article on the Jewish community in America, I realized that many of the young Jewish parents I had lived with expressed

their Jewishness not by joining Jewish organizations or going to the synagogue but by turning to Jewish material and non-material symbols. Consequently, I described their Jewishness as being based on what I then called symbolic Judaism (Gans, 1956).

After a subsequent fieldwork study among Italian Americans and a further decade of informal observations among various ethnic groups, as well as reading the then rapidly growing ethnic research literature, I realized that what I had learned about American Jewry could now be extended to other ethnic groups. At that point, I wrote my 1979 article about symbolic ethnicity. That article was not the result of ethnographic fieldwork or of whatever interviews I had conducted with white ethnics. It merely stated a hypothesis and hoped others would carry out the empirical research to test it. Nor did my article pursue an ideological agenda, and as far as I know not even an unconscious one; it was really a hypothesis that came out of observed data and years of gestation in the sociological part of my brain.

Anagnostou's article provides little evidence about how he reached the conclusions he did, what data he used and which ideological agendas he was pursuing. However, almost all of his examples are from Greece and several of his quotations refer to Greek movies and novels. I do not believe that one should rely too much on movies and novels to understand communities, however.

Perhaps Anagnostou reaches his conclusions because Greek Americans have adapted differently to America than other immigrants. I doubt from my reading of sociological studies of Greek Americans, including the two dissertations about them that I have sponsored, that this is the case. Nonetheless, whether I am right or wrong, Anagnostou's response to my comment should include some discussion of how and why he can reach his generalized conclusions about symbolic ethnicity and ethnic options from evidence limited to Greek Americans.

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HERBERT J. GANS is Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. Address: Department of Sociology, Columbia University, 1180 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10027, USA. [email: hjg1@columbia.edu]

Social science and ethnic options

MARY C. WATERS

Harvard University, USA

It is always gratifying for an author to know that their academic research and writing is read and taken seriously long after it is completed and published. Yiorgos Anagnostou's thoughtful and passionate paper most certainly engages with some of the central arguments of my 1990 book *Ethnic Options* and raises some provocative questions about its methodology, ideology and its relevance for understanding current issues of race and ethnicity. I think that we fundamentally disagree about issues of epistemology and the value of social scientific research, and I suspect that we also have some political disagreements, although I am not sure of the exact nature of Anagnostou's stance on issues of racial equality and justice. Yet, I am pleased that we agree that ethnic identity remains a fascinating and complex social phenomenon, worthy of informed debate and scrutiny.

Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation, completed over 20 years ago. I can now see that, like many academic books (especially first books), it has deep autobiographical roots. I grew up as a third-generation upwardly mobile Irish American. Being Irish was the only reality my four immigrant grandparents knew in the US. It meant a lot to my parents, who grew up in ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods and attended homogeneous schools, surrounded not only by Irish Americans, but primarily by second-generation Irish Americans. Yet by the time my seven brothers and sisters and I entered young adulthood, ethnicity was much less salient – we lived in white neighborhoods, but surrounded by other ethnicities, we intermarried and formed close friendships and ties with other whites, and increasingly over